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## State secrecy, public assent, and representational practices of U.S. covert action

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Previous theories of state secrecy have presumed that its role in public discourse is shaped by the intent and practices of the state. This is reflected in scholarship on U.S. covert action representations, which theorises that secrecy is articulated by the state such that it rationalises covertness as an exceptionalist act, prompting assent towards U.S. violence. Through the example of a 2014 drone strike in Pakistan, the article argues that contemporary U.S. counterterrorism breaches this analytic: covertness is not articulated by the state but is inferred from state silence and rumours and debris in news representations. This suspected secrecy frames ambiguities in the reported public evidence, highlighting the uncertain scope and purpose of that secrecy and undermining any legitimisation of covert action. An ethical orientation focused on the enigmatic quality of covert operations comes closer to restless acquiescence than complicity with state discourse, re-framing the question of contesting state violence.

**Keywords:** secrecy; representation; covert action; dissent; drone strikes; legitimisation

In the course of President Obama's terms in office, there has been an increasing tendency to characterise U.S. foreign policy in covert terms. As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan officially wound down, public attention has shifted to an array of state activities seen as the new emblems of U.S. counterterrorism. These activities are united by their public portrayal as entailing various degrees of state secrecy. The CIA programme of armed drones, in Pakistan, Yemen and elsewhere, is frequently described as a 'covert programme' that represents 'the next phase in the so-called "war on terror"' (Reprieve 2015), a programme epitomising 'Barack Obama's secret war on terror' (Woods 2012). Elsewhere there is talk of a 'shadow war' of 'kill/capture' operations carried out by U.S. Special Forces in different countries (Kelley 2013), of a 'covert war in North Africa' against terrorists and hostage-takers that involves '[s]mall teams of special operations forces' (Dozier 2012), and evidence of a 'covert "war on terror"' in Somalia involving 'surveillance, reconnaissance, and assault and capture operations' (Bureau of Investigative Journalism 2015).

This incessant awareness of covert action indicates an overlap of secrecy and publicity – that state secrecy has the ability not merely to restrict the possibility of representing covert activities but to actually be signified and characterised within such representations, materialising in the public sphere and shaping the meanings attached to state practices. While a U.S. covert action is one where 'it is intended that the role of the United States Government will not be apparent or acknowledged publicly' (U.S. Code 2013, § 3093 (e)), the action itself *and that intention* may nonetheless enter the public sphere.

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While this intersection of secrecy and publicity has been increasingly acknowledged in critical security studies scholarship (e.g. Walters 2015), the present article argues for a more attentive conceptualisation of state secrecy's public existence. The ability of state secrecy to shape the meaning attached to covert action depends upon *how* the act of secrecy and ideas about the secret's contents materialise in the public sphere. This raises the question of how covertness is theorised in relation to the state. In the existing critical literature on state secrecy, the definition of secrecy as an act of hiding things from others has been translated into a conceptual link between the state's intentions and secrecy's influence. Secrecy has been theorised as a state strategy of shaping public discourse, and as such, the representational dynamics of secrecy have been delimited to those that fit this strategy.

In this way, secrecy has been placed within an already-existing conceptual schema designed to explain how states precondition public meaning around their foreign policy practices. In this schema, meaning is pre-empted by the state through 'the dissemination of specific interpretations of representational practices', for instance, a narrative of the state's role in the world that 'render[s]' a representation 'decipherable [and] meaningful' by prompting an understanding of the latter as echoing the terms of the narrative (Shepherd 2008, 214, 218). It is in this way, for instance, that visualised bodies become meaningful in racialised and gendered terms that appear to confirm the professed liberal humanitarian rationale of a U.S. military intervention (Kozol 2014, 74–7). This schema has been applied when analysing representational practices of recent counterterrorism, including the mediated witnessing of war, rendition and detention 'back home', in order to explain how states 'create and maintain an "interpretive frame" that privilege[s] a reading' of these practices as 'essential in the fight against terrorism' (Van Veen 2011, 1724).

While insightful in the case of overt warfare, the use of this preconditioning model in the case of state secrecy neglects what makes secrecy so distinctive as a discursive practice: secrecy implies the *non*-disclosure of information, an act that the actor herself may not wish to communicate or draw attention to. The idea of secrecy as preconditioning public discourse, beyond attempting to ensure the absence of certain information, cannot therefore be presumed *a priori*. A state's use of covert action, an act designed ostensibly so that the state's role is *not* revealed, need not involve an address *by* the state *to* the public. Yet as the article will demonstrate, this is precisely how state secrecy has been theorised in the critical literature, positioning secrecy as yet another way for states to shape public understandings of its practices.

This article examines how this theoretical presumption is made. Having demonstrated how more general theories of state secrecy conceptualise it as a state strategy, the article examines scholarship which argues that the secrecy around U.S. covert action is addressed to the public through two representational elements: state declarations to the public and glimpses of covert violence being carried out. These two elements signify not just secrecy but a *rationale* for its use, pre-empting how such uses are then understood.

As the article goes on to argue, this presumption of secrecy's public existence does not hold in contemporary cases of U.S. covert counterterrorism, such as drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia. Here, accounts of covert practices are accompanied by a conspicuous state silence in response, while the only glimpses provided are not of the practices themselves, which pass unseen, but rumours and debris left in their aftermath. It is these two representational elements which materialise state secrecy in the public sphere, this time as a mere inferred suspicion. While the practice of drone strikes is acknowledged in the abstract, representations of strike actions are not preconditioned by a rationale for the use of secrecy.

The significance of this production of public secrecy is that it challenges the predominant idea of how state violence abroad is legitimised in public discourse and what constitutes legitimation. As Matthew Lampert has recently noted, interpellation – the adoption of a subject-position implied by a representation from which the latter ‘makes sense’ or is intelligible – is frequently parsed as a matter of an address made by one subject to another. In the case of counterterrorism, the public encounters a state narrative which appears to ‘hail’ them, prompting individuals to respond to that imagined address by either accepting or rejecting the subject-position being suggested of them (Lampert 2015, 130). Subject-formation is thus conceptualised as subordination to a hegemonic discourse (140), a subordination which leads to ‘complicit[y]’ with a state’s rationalisation of its policies (Shepherd 2008, 214). This conceptual schema frames the ethical challenge of representational practices of state violence, including those of covert action, as one of preventing that complicity, of resisting subordination to hegemonic modes of meaning.

The article argues that state secrecy broadens and nuances this ethical model of complicity-resistance, as interpellation from secrecy need not involve an address by an actor whose meaning-making is hegemonic. If the state’s use of secrecy does not involve an attempt to prompt U.S. citizens and those of other ‘counterterrorist’ states to assent to that use, resisting state violence may exceed the challenging of the state’s supposed preconditioning of public discourse. Resistance will depend on *how* state secrecy materialises in public and appears to address those who encounter it through representational practices, whether or not that perceived hail rationalises the use of secrecy.

Being articulated through conspicuous silence and public traces, the state secrecy of contemporary covert action can actually undermine the legitimisation of these state practices. The article demonstrates this possibility through an emblematic case of contemporary U.S. covert counterterrorism, a 2014 U.S. drone strike in Pakistan, where ambiguities in the public evidence of the strike are framed by a suspicion of secrecy, such that they signify doubts and uncertainties around the extent and purpose of that secrecy. These significations implicitly challenge claims made about the event that would otherwise echo a wider U.S. rationalisation of its counterterrorism. While this secrecy therefore does not demonise or dehumanise the targets of covert violence and legitimise that violence, it does, however, shape a subject-position focused on the seemingly enigmatic traces of this unseen covert event, positioning that enigmatic quality and its indeterminate implications as the source of the event’s significance.

The political stakes of this subject-position differ from those previously associated with state secrecy: far from suggesting that assent towards state violence should be countered with dissent from a state discourse, the Pakistan drone strike case suggests that undermining state rationales does not necessarily prompt a recognition and assessment of the ethical import of the violence itself. Such consideration of the infliction of violence depends on how state secrecy makes covert action meaningful, how secrecy represents that action as ethically significant. This is a matter of how secrecy ‘invest[s]’ violence with ‘ethical orientations regarding what is legitimate and fair to feel and do’ towards that violence (Chouliaraki 2009, 217). In cases where secrecy renders covert action significant in terms of its enigmatic public traces, it consequently shapes a narrow ethical orientation closer to acquiescence than assent. This orientation is focused on endless scrutiny of indeterminate rumours and debris, and their implications in terms of the U.S. state’s use of covertness, at the expense of scrutinising the ethics of the use of force.

### Secrecy as a state instrument

Despite its official secrecy of plausible deniability, contemporary U.S. covert counter-terrorism is far from unknown: the general existence and characterisations of these operations are part of public discourse. Indeed, for a secret to materialise in the public sphere, it is not enough for an actor to hold knowledge that others do not possess; that inequality of knowledge must be recognisable, along with an indication that the secret's contents will not be disclosed (Blakely 2012, 49). To be covert, then, need not mean to be clandestine: a state may conduct actions which are themselves public in some way, suggesting the keeping of secrets by an as-yet-unknown political actor, even as the specific state's role remains obscured (Radsan 2009, 534). Details of the covert action, even suggestions as to the state sponsor, may be signified by its public traces, including state declarations or denials. Covert action can thus become an open secret, whereby the 'withholding, obfuscation and opacity' which are maintaining the secret are themselves represented, along with 'almost-knowledge' of details which '[resist] substantiation' (Birchall 2014, 33; Bhattacharyya 2008, 112).

The representation of covert action *as* covert action therefore involves the representation of a state practice as one *that remains largely hidden*. Representations of open secrets emphasise their own partiality. But the critical literature on state secrecy over the past decade has foreclosed the full range of possibilities as to how this partiality is signified, of how the open secret materialises in the public sphere. If secrecy materialises as a social relation, between those in the know and those who are not, then the literature on covert action has taken that relation as being produced by articulations *from the state* which holds the secret. This analytic uses the social relation between the state and the public as the basis for conceptualising the representational practices of state secrecy and consequently delimits those practices to secrecy's instrumental use by the state. This is reflected in three recent theorisations of state secrecy in public discourse.

The first theorisation by Jack Bratich posits that while knowledge and details of covert action may percolate the public sphere, these snippets of information only further confuse public understanding, mystifying covert operations (Bratich 2006). Bratich characterises this as a matter of turning '[r]evelations' of the existence of covert action into 'a *strategy* of public perception management', one that 'renew[s] the power of the spectacle as it *appropriates* the powers of secrecy for itself' (498, emphasis added). In speaking of revelations of secrets as a public perception strategy, Bratich traces state secrecy's representational dynamics back to the state, as that which reveals secrets in an equivocal or ambiguous manner and uses that representational power to restrict interpellative possibilities. By conceptualising state secrecy as being 'put ... in circulation' solely when 'deployed as strategy' by the state, Bratich delimits the representational dynamics associated with a "'making visible" of secrecy' to those that act as 'a way of short-circuiting critique' (501, 496).

A second recent theorisation by Eva Horn differentiates between two ways that the 'withdrawal from knowledge, communication and debate' can 'be enacted' (Horn 2011, 108). The first is the logic of 'arcanum', where state secrecy is produced by keeping state practices 'locked away and hidden' for the purposes of effective government, opening up an exceptionalist space for action that stabilises state authority (108, 105–6). The second is the logic of 'secretum', where secrecy materialises in public discourse through 'the awareness (or belief or suspicion) *that* a secret exists', fostering a relation of 'social inclusion and exclusion' between 'those who suspect and those who are "supposed to know"' (109, original emphasis). In either case, the discursive dynamics of secrecy are

produced by the state's withholding of information. In the logic of arcanum, the state's 'technique of silence and concealment' signifies 'the prerogative of power to withhold certain issues from debate ... [and] take care of issues behind closed doors'; by keeping potentially damaging secrets out of the public sphere, the state remains legitimised (108, 107). In the logic of secretum, the representation of the state as having 'the potential for future disclosure' of the suspected secret 'constitutes the power that [the secret's] holder has over others' (109). In Horn's theorisation, it is the state's act of withholding that shapes representational practices of secrecy, with secrecy either rationalising state power or nonetheless confirming that power in the eyes of the public.

A third significant theorisation of state secrecy is that of Joseph Masco. Masco argues that the U.S. state has increasingly justified withholding information about its practices on the grounds that any innocuous piece of information poses a potential threat to national security once in the public sphere, since it could be combined with other bits of information to produce dangerous knowledge (Masco 2010). The state's 'discursive positioning' of information as dangerous is what determine secrecy's discursive dynamics, with the state using 'a vast system of secrecy' as 'a fully nationalised system of perception management and control' (443). By 'promising catastrophic consequences for ... revelation' while 'classifying the considerations, evidence, and precedents supporting such an assertion', thus denying the public any knowledge of the predicted consequences of covert action, the state shapes a public subject-position whereby any such repercussions in the form of 'blowback' 'appear to the U.S. public as without context and thus irrational'. This subject-position reiterates identities of an inherently violent terrorist enemy and a calm U.S. state 'provoked by irrational attacks' (454, 450).

In each of these theorisations, secrecy is conceptualised as an instrument of state strategy, a public representational practice instigated and determined by state intent and actions. This conceptualisation begs the question of state secrecy's dynamics in public discourse, since there is no *a priori* reason why the public existence of secrecy should align with the state's political rationale for that secrecy. This is a question of *how* state secrecy materialises and *from where* significations of secrecy arise. State secrecy may not necessarily be something that is addressed *by* the state *to* the public. This presumption nevertheless lays the foundation for a theory of covert action representations as shaping subject-positions of public assent.

### **Gazing at covert violence: state secrecy and assent**

If state secrecy's public existence is perceived to be a result of its instrumental articulation by the state, then representational practices of that secrecy will appear designed to forward state objectives in some way. Scholarship on the representation of U.S. covert action has translated this predisposition into an explicit theory of how covertness interpellates public assent towards state violence, tracing the discursive dynamics of state secrecy to two representational elements: textual and visual glimpses of covert action being carried out, and contextual articulations by the state carrying out such action. These two elements combined signify that the state is keeping secrets from the public, that not everything about the covert action is being revealed. State declarations are taken to articulate a rationale for the use of covertness which preconditions the meaning of glimpses of covert violence, prompting witnesses of those glimpses to understand them *through* the discursive framework invoked by this rationale. State secrecy therefore makes U.S. covert action meaningful in terms of the characterisations and identities implied by the state's articulation of secrecy. With that secrecy thought to further state objectives, this scholarship concludes that the



covertness of state operations rationalises those operations and interpellates U.S. and allied states' populations into complicity with that rationalisation, thereby assenting to the use of covert violence.

This representational dynamic of state secrecy takes on different forms depending upon the time frame considered. Timothy Melley theorises that the secrecy of Cold War U.S. covert operations made covert action tolerable for the U.S. public by interpellating them into accepting that they *should not know* about those things which are being kept secret. To make this argument, Melley adapts Louis Althusser's example of interpellation whereby the subject responds to the policeman who shouts 'Hey, you there!', by turning round, thus being 'hailed' into the subject-position they think is suggested by that shout (Althusser 1971, 174). In the case of Cold War state acknowledgements of covert action, 'instead of the subject answering when the state says, "Hey, you!" ... [the public] close their eyes when the state says, "Don't look"' (Melley 2012, 15).

The public looks away because it has something to look at, namely fantastic fictional narratives centred around heroic covert agents, what Michael Rogin calls an 'easily forgettable series of surface entertainments'. By acting as glimpses of covert action, these entertainment spectacles allow the public to 'have the experience' of seeing such operations being enacted without having to consider their real sociopolitical impacts, since these operations exist as mere theatre, their consequences 'never reach[ing], directly and forcefully, into [the public's] lives' (Rogin 1990, 106, 117). The absence of real-world consequence is important because these narratives portray covert agents as figures who must *usurp* the law and normal democratic procedures in order to *protect* those institutions, and by extension the public, from subversive threats to this 'way of life' (Melley 2012, 210–212). These representations fall into the tradition of countersubversion, where the monstrous, barbaric or evil nature of threats justifies responses which mirror this threatening behaviour (Rogin 1987, xiii).

It is secrecy which legitimises this exceptionalism. The secrecy which materialises through state appeals to look away and fantasies of countersubversive action signifies that concrete details are being kept hidden for a reason: so that the U.S. public can maintain a separation between its self-perception as democratic and civilised and any extralegal and unpleasant covert action which might challenge that self-perception. State appeals of 'Don't look!' and entertainment spectacles of heroic but maverick agents together suggest that keeping covert action secret is in the public's best interests (Melley 2012, 173–174). The subject-position produced by secrecy is therefore one that tolerates covert action as a necessary exceptionalism, so long as the public is not told the dirty details.

In the case of U.S. and British covert operations following 11 September 2001, the acknowledgement of covert action has been theorised not as a simple invocation not to look, nor are entertainment spectacles of exceptionalist heroic agents the only glimpses now provided. In the 'War on Terror' period, that covert practices are being committed without public awareness is often acknowledged implicitly rather than explicitly, as in the case of redacted documents on extraordinary rendition and torture. As Conley and Saas argue, by placing thick strips of black ink over parts of the text, information is not so much hidden as *visibly obscured*, thus signifying state secrecy in public. In the context of questions over whether enhanced interrogation techniques constitute torture, these documents have been conceptualised as 'a mischievous way to admit the inadmissible', a way for the U.S. to implicitly acknowledge that problematic techniques are being used by 'passing over' or declining to describe the policy, instead 'naming through coyly refusing to name' (Conley and Saas 2010, 331). This coy refusal signifies the incontestable way that certain bodies can now be treated by the state – incontestable because redaction



ensures that these practices remain unverifiable, their lines of accountability muddled, leaving the mind to ‘imagine any number of ghastly deeds’ beneath ‘the smattering of black ink’ (341).

Alongside these refusals to name, entertainment fantasies of covert action now compete with glimpses of actual covert practice, from rendition to detention and torture (Van Veeren 2011). These glimpses are not all deliberately relayed by the state, but nonetheless ‘[t]here is little attempt to hide what is being done, only to deny culpability’ (Bhattacharyya 2008, 121). This denial replaces state acknowledgements of any covert practice with mere ‘affirm[ations]’ of ‘the necessity of extreme measures’. Covert practices are ‘not denied, but instead not admitted but justified with reference to our newly dangerous times’ in terms of the terrorist threat faced (140).

Gargi Bhattacharyya conceptualises state secrecy as emerging from this combination of state refusals to confirm or deny and glimpses of actual covert practices being enacted. This secrecy preconditions the meaning of these glimpses as horrifically suggestive but ultimately inconclusive, since this secrecy materialises as a form of uncertainty over the nature of the covert practices portrayed and what remains covered up. This secrecy shapes a subject-position not of entertained complacency but of paralysed suspicion, with the public ‘see[ing] enough to learn to be terrified at what [they] do not see’ and accepting the incontestability of the state’s treatment of certain bodies (59, 113–114). At the same time, by suggesting that much of these practices remain covered up or unsubstantiated, state secrecy shapes a subject-position from which covert operations ‘make sense’ as exceptional actions of an uncivilised nature – that this is *why* they are being kept hidden – in contrast to the implicit normal civilised behaviour of the state (142–144). Witnesses are thus prompted to view these glimpses from the perspective of a horrified, and therefore civilised, multi-national counterterrorist population, while ‘[t]he barbarians are those beyond the contract of circulating knowledges’ (141) – that is, those individuals and populations who are presumed *not* to react with such horror.

In making the argument that state secrecy fosters public assent, the scholarship discussed implicitly invokes an analytic which argues that representations of violence can shape subject-positions equivalent to the violence’s perpetrators. When those representations appear to echo discourses which demonise or dehumanise targets of such violence, these representations do not prompt witnesses to consider the subjectivity of represented sufferers, considered a key aspect of the ethical witnessing of violence (Kozol 2014, 149–152). Instead, the witness adopts and reiterates a discursive framework seemingly implied by the infliction of the violence, and consequently, the witness understands the violated body as the perpetrator sees her, as mere corporeal evidence of desecration rather than as a suffering subject in her own right (Chouliaraki 2009, 221–2). Moreover, this discursive framework positions that violation as evidence of the body’s social identity and position relative to the perpetrators (Alexander 1994). As Sue Tait assesses the theory, this alignment of gazes is presumed to interpellate the public as ‘a participatory spectator in an act intended to terrorize’, adopting and reiterating the perpetrator’s rationalisation of its violence (Tait 2008, 103).

Echoing the dominant understanding of interpellation discussed earlier, this theory of the witnessing of violence presents subject-formation as a matter of being ‘hailed’ by violence’s perpetrators. The only difference here is that it is state secrecy which aligns the public’s understanding with the perpetrator of covert violence, by signifying the state’s apparent *rationale for its secrecy* – either as a way for the public to maintain its civilised self-perception in face of necessary exceptionalism, or as a way to obscure horrific violence which contrasts with the ‘normal’ behaviour of the state. The rationale implicit

in the state's articulation of secrecy constitutes the hail to which witnesses can respond only by accepting or rejecting that rationalisation, assenting to or dissenting from the state's use of covert violence.

Given that these theorisations echo a theory of witnessing derived from *overt* violence, however, they sharply foreclose the political dynamics of state secrecy in the public sphere. Secrecy becomes just another way for hegemonic actors to interpellate the public into assenting to its violent practices, which just happen to be covert. The secrecy which carries out this instrumental role is a by-product of two very particular representational characteristics: state articulations and glimpses of state violence being enacted. These two characteristics are necessary for secrecy to foster assent, since the rationale for secrecy implied and then seemingly echoed by them is what prompts witnesses to understand the state's use of covert violence in ways that legitimise that use. Were these two characteristics to disappear, state secrecy may materialise differently, its discursive dynamics altered. Readers and viewers might therefore also be prompted by that secrecy differently.

### Contemporary covert action and suspicions of secrecy

Does the state secrecy around contemporary U.S. counterterrorism materialise in the public sphere as per the theories discussed earlier? On 29 September 2014, news media reported that a U.S. drone strike had taken place the previous day in Karikot, north-western Pakistan. The *New York Times*' report of the strike went little beyond the information from 'Pakistani officials' that the strike had 'occurred' and a note of its target, '[a] vehicle parked near a house' (Masood 2014). What else was said about the strike took the form of speculation which emphasised how little was known. The strike was described as having 'killed at least four people' who were 'suspected of being militants', with two 'believed to be citizens of Arab nations' – '[b]ut their identities could not be immediately confirmed'. This is all that was said about the strike itself, with the rest of the article concerned with more general speculation over whether the U.S.'s 'classified drone program' in Pakistan was winding down, given the decreased number of strikes in recent months, as well as a note that 'activists and the Pakistani government do not agree' on the number of civilian casualties from these strikes (Masood 2014).

Such sparse reporting in the aftermath of the event reflects the most common U.S. and British media representation of covert drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia. Mark Pope assesses that coverage of strikes in Pakistan which do not relate to 'high-value targets' is either non-existent or is mediated by anonymous 'Pakistan authorities'; these figures 'act as a gatekeeper for the information flow from the areas targeted', with these 'unnamed sources' detailing only the number of casualties and their suspected terrorist affiliation (Pope 2016, 7). With little 'contextual information' on the labelling of people as 'militants', and with those living in strike areas either absent or reduced to collectives such as 'local tribesmen', 'news concerning drones is ... largely anonymous' (12), and remains slight on details. Muhammad Ahmad concurs, noting that '[i]n the aftermath of each attack' in Pakistan, journalists follow 'certain strategic rituals that allow them to report' in the face of scant 'verifiable information', by drawing on anonymous state officials' claims, which results in repetitive coverage that details only material targets, casualty figures and their unnamed sources (Ahmad 2016, 23, 24–25). Jeffrey Ohl concludes that this 'truncated information' around strikes results in sparse news narratives which lack textual and visual 'dramatization' of the event (Ohl 2015, 622).

Taking the Karikot case as therefore emblematic, it is crucial to note that representations of covert strikes do not constitute glimpses of these operations' violent

enactment. These covert practices are represented neither through the visualisation of the target's violated body nor through any other portrayal, real or fictional, of the violent actions of covert agents. The Karikot operation is instead represented through signifiers of the event and its violence having passed unseen, without being witnessed. The vehicle is articulated as already-destroyed, the targets merely as a suspected death tally; their reporting and characterisation as such points to a violent event that has already occurred and that newsreaders have not witnessed. The slightness of reporting and the rest of the article's more general speculation signifies that the event has not been documented as it took place.

To be sure, demonological portrayals of the targets of overt counterterrorism in official war theatres continue to circulate in public discourse, with terrorist bodies identified and represented in gendered, racialised and dehumanising ways (Manchanda 2015). Popular culture also continues to portray the heroic exceptionalist exploits of covert agents (Brereton and Culloty 2012). Public discourse around covert drone strikes, however, pivots not on glimpses of demonised bodies and covert agents, but on bare-boned after-the-fact accounts of strikes and more generalised speculation on these programmes' legal, political and operational mechanisms. With no glimpse of the infliction of violence, which is merely hinted at in its aftermath, these representations fail to echo wider representational practices of counterterrorism and do not prompt an alignment of the public's understanding with the gaze of covert action's perpetrators.

It could reasonably be supposed that complicity in the rationalisation of covert strikes is nonetheless prompted by broader discussion of the U.S. drone programmes as an effort to defeat Islamic terrorism, a narrative reiterated by the more extensive and demonological coverage of strikes against 'high-value' targets (Pope 2016). Indeed, this is how strikes have been justified in the abstract by the U.S. as a mode of 'targeted killing' (*The White House* 2013), resonating with the broader justification of U.S. counterterrorism and preempting understanding of terms such as 'militant'. As will be shown, however, such a preconditioning of public discourse is undermined by a change in representational context afforded covert action in this case. Accounts of covert strikes are not accompanied by state acknowledgements – neither state commands to look away, nor state refusals to confirm or deny. Instead, they are accompanied by state silence, a non-acknowledgement of such glimpses. In the above news report, the Karikot strike is revealed by 'a local administration official' who spoke to the *Times* 'on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to talk to the news media', a statement which signifies an official silence from Pakistan and, given the lack of any other statement, the U.S. in response to the event (Masood 2014).

Juxtaposing the reporting of the strike through unconfirmed rumour and speculation over clandestine U.S. operations in Pakistan, this silence implicitly signifies secrecy merely as an inferred suspicion, based on how details of the event appear, are disseminated and are contextualised. While the report indicates its partiality, that not everything about the undocumented strike appears publicly visible in its aftermath, the representation does not articulate that either the event or the traces left in its wake are subject to secrecy. Without a U.S. acknowledgement of the event, this secrecy remains only an implicit possibility, an inference that crucially fails to articulate a rationale for that secrecy. Not only does the representation deny newsreaders a glimpse of covert violence, but details in the event's aftermath are not contextualised by a state declaration which would rationalise the operation's *being covert*. By neither telling the public to look away nor refusing to confirm or deny, the state does not shape the meaning of the suspected secrecy which now materialises in public.

### From assent to acquiescence

Without a state acknowledgement and glimpses of covert violence, the theory of state secrecy as fostering public assent cannot hold. Being produced by rumours and debris left in the wake of contemporary U.S. covert operations, this suspected secrecy does not belong to the state – that is, its discursive dynamics are neither instigated nor determined by U.S. articulations. Secrecy is not being addressed *by* the state *to* the public, and newsreaders are therefore not ‘hailed’ by the U.S. to assent to its covert activities. With no rationale for secrecy being articulated or echoed, there is no discursive framework that witnesses are prompted to adopt and legitimise, no rationalisation of the apparent use of covertness for newsreaders to ‘assent’ to.

It might be thought, however, that broader state discourse might nonetheless over-determine the meaning attached to these operations – that even if secrecy is not articulated instrumentally by the state, a preconditioned public discourse around counterterrorism could shape how reported strikes are understood. Crucially, however, the suspicion of secrecy produced by this news coverage shapes the representation of these covert events and undermines such pre-conditioning – not despite, but precisely *because* it is not addressed by the state, *because* it lacks an articulated rationale. Understanding how this secrecy might position newsreaders towards these events and their possible state sponsors means theorising subject-positions towards state violence that go beyond a binary model of assent-dissent.

Engels and Saas provide the beginnings of such a theorisation in their inquiry into official state discourse that has accompanied violent post-11 September 2001 foreign policy. They focus on representational practices that they argue entail not public assent but what they call public acquiescence. Alongside representations that act to ‘demoni[se] the enemy’, U.S. state officials have perpetuated rhetorics, characterisations and practices that encourage the public to ‘leave the war-making to the professionals’, which implore the public ‘*trust us, we’ve got this*’ (Engels and Saas 2013, 227, 228, original emphasis). Rather than indicate why state practices are best kept hidden, this address merely hints at possible ongoing covert activities without suggesting what they might be or prompting any particular subject-position on the part of the public towards those activities. No rationalisation is given of possible state violence or its secrecy; no exceptionalism is justified, nor an indication given that the public should avoid the dirty details. This address is therefore unlikely to act as ‘a mobilisation of the public ... for the prosecution of the “war on terror”’ – assent is not the representational logic at work here (227).

Instead of assent, whereby those addressed adopt a discursive framework which rationalises state violence, Engels and Saas see this state address as ‘promoting a glazed-over half-acceptance’ of unseen activities, ‘a process of coming to peace with war *while withholding assent*’ (227, 228–229, emphasis added), which they call acquiescence. This acquiescence is not assent, but nor is it a subject-position of dissent from or contesting covert violence. While this notion of acquiescence enriches the theorisation of state secrecy, the process by which acquiescence is produced needs clarifying. For while Engels and Saas posit acquiescence in the singular, their argument hints at two different kinds of ‘glazed-over half-acceptance’ of state violence. One subject-position is produced by representations that ‘display war in such a way that it cannot be contested’, ‘creat[ing] a symbolic landscape in which resistance to objective violence seems pointless’ (227). A second subject-position, however, is suggested by the notion of representations as ‘constituting a distracted civic body numb to violence abroad’, an interpellation that produces ‘numbness toward the unacceptable human costs of battle’ (227, 229). As Ohl

argues in relation to stock imagery of stationary or anonymous drones, drab monotonous representations can signify that they do not provide a glimpse of the violent event itself and will remain opaque despite scrutiny, and can consequently shape a subject-position of disinterest, disengagement and 'deadened sensation', dulling witnesses' senses towards state violence (Ohl 2015, 623).

The secrecy around contemporary covert actions such as the Karikot strike suggests yet another kind of acquiescence, one not shaped through a desensitisation or numbness to war. While the above logics of acquiescence continue to pivot on state articulations and perpetuate the hegemony of state discourse around its covert violence, this different acquiescence stems from the *absence* of an actual state address that 'We've got this'. The suspicion of secrecy produced by the public traces documented in the *Times* article is neither articulated nor made meaningful by the state. Instead, this secrecy gains meaning in relation to the other public traces of the strike and vice versa, including the various lacunae, ambiguities and uncertainties signified in this coverage. Having hinted at secrecy, these ambiguities are implicitly represented by that secrecy as ambiguities in the public record of the covert event, of how and why it happened *in secret*. Without a state narrative that might frame the significance of each piece of public evidence, and without a rationalisation of secrecy to narrate and make sense of the ambiguities within that evidence – framing them, for instance, as things one should look away from – each public detail seems no more definitive about the covert event than any other. As a result, these uncertainties each reflect back on the suspected secrecy in an equivocal manner, signifying that they cannot confirm and clarify the extent and purpose of that secrecy, that they cannot account for its possible use and its relation to these public traces. In other words, they highlight the absence of an articulated rationale for that secrecy.

In the case of the Karikot strike, the lack of knowledge over the targets' identities juxtaposes a suspicion of secrecy and so signifies that it leaves unanswered who was targeted in secret, in what sense they were considered operationally important, and why they were targeted covertly rather than overtly. Suspicion around their nationality is framed similarly, prompting the question of whether that nationality is significant or merely an arbitrary scrap of available information; without a rationalisation of secrecy's use, the reception of this detail is not preconditioned to make it intelligible for news-readers. The bareness of the references to the site and target of the strike signify the paucity of material traces able to answer these questions, but without confirming that this paucity reflects covertness. Through the juxtaposition of a suspicion of secrecy and the sparse speculative nature of this news coverage, this representation implicitly signifies that it is unclear whether secrecy extends to the identities of the targets and details of the event, if these too have been or are being kept hidden, and if so why.

In lieu of state articulations, it is these gaps in knowledge which give meaning to possible secrecy, defining it by ambiguity over its scope and its aims. As such, the suspicion of secrecy undercuts the certainty of claims about those targeted, which prevents references to 'militants' from echoing a wider U.S. rationalisation of its counterterrorism. Representations such as of the Karikot strike therefore prompt not a numbness towards violence, but doubt and scrutiny towards claims that would otherwise legitimise the use of violence.

While this representation of state secrecy disrupts the rationalisation of state violence, however, it does not shape a subject-position of dissent, of seeing the human costs of that violence as unethical. By prompting newsreaders to focus on uncertainties and questions around the state's covert power, secrecy makes the speculation and debris of the strike meaningful in terms of being enigmatic: those details are defined by their hinting at

meaning, in terms of how and why this operation and its aftermath may have involved secrecy, that remains out of reach. Rather than cultivate disengagement, these enigmatic traces prompt restless scrutiny of the representation for meaning, the matter of how the public is prompted through a focus on irresolvable questions that are implicitly raised. Casualties are not represented as uncivilised threats justifying exceptionalist responses, but rather as being similarly enigmatic, their characteristics rendered opaque by the destroyed objects and equivocal rumours left behind. The violence of the strike is not legitimised but rather marginalised, as the event is made meaningful and significant in terms of remaining inconclusive in the public sphere.

Representations such as of the Karikot strike therefore do not shape an ethical orientation focused on the violence inflicted upon casualties; the human cost of these events is not represented as demanding ethical consideration. Suspected secrecy prompts a focus away from such consideration and towards uncertainties in the public record of the event and the state's covert capabilities.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that state secrecy need not be owned by the state – that is, secrecy need not materialise in the public sphere as a result of state articulations, and its discursive dynamics need not be shaped by that state. The article assessed previous theories of state secrecy which posit it as an instrument of manipulating public discourse, an argument which supports theories of U.S. covert action representations as fostering public assent towards state violence. These theories have presumed that the U.S. state's political rationale and the role of covertness in public discourse are necessarily connected. This need not be the case: as these theories implicitly acknowledge, the ability of state secrecy to interpellate public assent depends upon how that secrecy is produced, whether it is a result of state articulations and glimpses of covert violence that together give meaning to and rationalise the use of secrecy. Without those two representational elements, secrecy might materialise and gain meaning differently. The article has argued that this is indeed the case for much contemporary U.S. counterterrorism, using a 2014 drone strike in Pakistan as a representative example. Here, secrecy materialises through conspicuous silence from the state, a non-acknowledgement of the reported event, and the rumours and debris left behind. Without an accompanying state rationale for its use, that secrecy gains meaning through the public traces of the covert strike, allowing the various lacunae and ambiguities in those traces to signify that the scope and purpose of that secrecy is unverifiable. These significations prompt not assent towards state violence but questions and doubt towards claims that would otherwise legitimise that violence.

The political stakes of this representational practice of state secrecy is that it redefines the question of dissent from state violence. Previous critical security studies literature has emphasised the role of hegemonic discursive frameworks in giving meaning to state violence, for instance around U.S. counterterrorism practices, such that it legitimises the use of that violence. The ethical challenge constructed is one of resisting the hegemony of such meaning-making, of disrupting representational practices that demonise or dehumanise the targets of U.S. counterterrorism. This article is under no illusion as to the continuing salience of such discourse. However, contemporary U.S. covert practices suggest that a disruption of such discourse will not necessarily be sufficient to prompt the kind of public dissent that this literature often implies. Covert actions such as the Karikot drone strike discussed earlier may well be represented such that a suspicion of secrecy around them undercuts and even delegitimises U.S. state discourses about its counterterrorism. But the subject-position shaped by

these suspicions of secrecy nonetheless marginalises ethical consideration of the violence being inflicted, by prompting newsreaders to focus instead on the enigmatic quality of these unseen events and their public remainders. This subject-position approaches a kind of acquiescence that stands outside the model of assent-dissent so often implicit in discussion of representational practices of U.S. foreign policy.

This acquiescence complicates the question of challenging the legitimisation of U.S. state violence. Contemporary covert counterterrorism does not appear to be legitimised in a similar manner to previous covert action. There is no obvious state ‘hail’ to public assent that one can confront or ‘unmask’. Moreover, the suspected secrecy produced by contemporary representations can undermine the demonological discourses that would normally be thought to rationalise U.S. violence. What is at stake, then, is not the potential for public assent or dissent, but the matter of how the public is prompted to consider the significance of the public traces left in the wake of covert violence, whether the inconclusive details left in the public sphere become defined by their being enigmatic in relation to secrecy. While this characterisation is not inevitable, the article has detailed this possibility in order to disrupt a simple theorisation of interpellation from covert action based around assent and dissent. Contemporary U.S. state secrecy need not be ‘addressed’ by the state to the public in order to materialise in and shape public discourse. The subject-positions produced should therefore not be counterpoised to some ideal of public dissent from state rationales. This issue is not dissent; it is how the public traces of U.S. counterterrorism and suspicions of secrecy produce and shape one another’s meaning in the public sphere.

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